Multicultural secularism, equality and faith schools: Muslim and non-religious perspectives

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Abstract

In *The New Governance of Religious Diversity*, Tariq Modood and Thomas Sealy endorse the expansion of state funded faith schools as a way to better recognise, accommodate and include religious minorities. Drawing on the case of Britain, this commentary argues that faith schools' far-reaching exemptions from equality law in fact exacerbate Islamophobia and can hardly be reconciled with the authors' egalitarian commitments. An alternative approach of removing the exemptions and making all schools religiously diverse would address internal tensions in Muslim demands and clear the path for new political alliances between Muslim and non-religious groups.

Keywords

Secularism; multiculturalism; faith schools; Muslims; discrimination; equality

1. Introduction

At least since Rawls' *Political Liberalism* (1993) and its endorsement of irreducibly diverse but reasonable and overlapping 'comprehensive doctrines', academic debates on secularism have been informed by an acknowledgment of religion as an enduring social fact and specifically by the concerns and claims of religious minorities. Building on their previous work around Islamophobia, Muslim struggles for recognition and state-religion connections (Modood 2019; Modood and Sealy 2022), Modood and Sealy's book *The New Governance of Religious Diversity*

(Modood and Sealy 2024) develops a comprehensive normative proposal hinging on the principle of equality between religions and beliefs, which they label 'multicultural secularism'. They argue that this proposal is especially achievable in 'moderately secular' societies such as Britain, Belgium and Germany, whose policy frameworks and public values generally align with its tenets. In those contexts, according to the authors, moving from moderate to multicultural secularism requires extending most existing forms of state support for majority religions to minority ones. They contrast this multicultural 'thickening' of state-religion connections with liberal proposals to 'thin' them out, particularly when it comes to the collective dimension of religious life, and argue that their own approach better responds to the real-world demands of Muslims.

One of the policies the book endorses is state funding for minority faith schools on a par with majority ones, alongside exemptions from equalities legislation. Drawing on this example, this commentary argues that Modood and Sealy's multicultural secularism, while attractive and rich in empirical insights, takes an inconsistent approach to religious equality that limits its capacity to offer persuasive guidance in key policy areas. The commentary further argues that the inconsistency stems from the authors' neglect of internal contradictions in the demands of Muslim groups, combined with limited attention to secularist claims. Foregrounding these issues reveals underexamined opportunities for progressive alliances between religious minorities and non-religious groups, and the need for a mix of multicultural 'thickening' and 'thinning' in moderately secular societies.

2. Multicultural secularism: A truncated path to equality?

Like Modood's previous work on multiculturalism (Modood 2007), *The New Governance* hinges on a conception of equality that does not entail uniformity of treatment but the recognition of difference. As Modood and Sealy explain, the aim of multicultural secularism is to transform negative difference into positive difference, firstly by identifying and prohibiting discrimination

and secondly by supporting and accommodating minorities' participation in public life. The rationale is that such an approach will empower minorities to actively combat stigmatisation and 'othering', keep alive their identities and customs, and ultimately make national membership more inclusive. The authors specify that accommodation and inclusion should remain sensitive to religious communities' unique demands instead of being applied uniformly across the board, as well as ensure that a diverse range of religious voices are heard. This can be achieved by capturing evolving patterns of religious identification in censuses as well as through symbolic acknowledgement, consultation and financial support (Modood and Sealy 2024, 115-121).

Modood and Sealy pay specific attention to multicultural secularism's manifestations in the sphere of education, for example in the accommodation of religious diets and dress as well as the celebration of religious holidays. While most of their proposals seem to align with their conception of equality, the same cannot be said of their twin endorsement of state-funded faith schools and the exemption of these schools from some equality regulations:

> [A]t a general level Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom all have guarantees and mechanisms in their constitutions and primary legislation that recognise and support public roles for religion. This is especially so in vital public service areas such as welfare and education, which remain significant sites for such recognition, despite increasing secularisation. They also enjoy certain exemptions from certain equalities legislation that can be seen to recognise the significance of religion. Moreover, these kinds of arrangements, which are in many ways contemporary expressions of historical processes, have been extended to minorities [...]. Although the expansion of faith schools is an example of a move in what we consider to be the right direction, these kinds of measures should be further supported and made available where they are desired by the communities themselves (Modood and Sealy 2024, 129-130, 137).

The practical implications of this endorsement can be assessed in light of the equalities regime for state-funded faith schools in England. In 2023, according to UK government data, 28% of primary-level pupils and 18% of secondary-level pupils were enrolled in faith schools, a proportion that had remained stable since the year 2000. Under Schedule 19 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, faith schools are allowed to provide religious education exclusively in their own faith instead of following a more diverse syllabus covering the main religions practiced in Britain. In addition, they enjoy broad exemptions from the prohibition of religious discrimination found in the Equality Act 2010, set out in Schedule 11 Paragraph 5 and Schedule 22 Paragraph 4 of the Act. As a result, they are also allowed to select all or some of their staff and pupils on religious grounds, with the proportion varying according to their level of local authority control and time of creation (Long, Roberts and Maisuria 2024). Since a vast majority of state-funded faith schools are run by the Church of England or the Catholic Church, with non-Christian ones making up a tiny albeit growing minority, mutually reinforcing religious discrimination and segregation reduces many Christian pupils' opportunities to learn about and from religious minorities. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to systematically demonstrate how such processes drive Islamophobia (for such a demonstration, see Dupont 2025), it is worth pointing out that the problem has been flagged by leading multiculturalist theorists such as Will Kymlicka (2003) and Bhikhu Parekh (2008, 94).

3. Secularist and Muslim positions on faith schools

Britain's foremost secularist organisations, Humanists UK and the National Secular Society, have spent many years arguing that faith schools' exemptions from equality law harm those who are not religious and religious minorities alike. As of May 2025, Humanists UK's website proclaimed that no state-funded school should be allowed to 'discriminate against pupils of the "wrong" or no religion' since it 'leads to segregation along religious and socio-economic lines', among other issues. It also denounced faith school recruitment and employment policies

according to which ‘applicants can be rejected and staff barred from promotion if they are not of the “right” religion, or of no religion’, and the fact that religious education in faith schools is ‘usually “confessional” in nature, with the aim of instructing children in the doctrine and practices of a particular religion, rather than about different religions and humanism as an academic subject’ (Humanists UK, n.d.). Similarly, a report from the National Secular Society published in 2020 documents the ‘faith-shaped holes’ in equality law that have perpetuated discrimination in the education sector. It underscores that these gaps were ‘built into the Equality Act from the outset, often due to lobbying from religious groups’, and led to ‘undesirable and unnecessary religious discrimination, fuelling societal segregation, and reducing opportunities for people because of who they are or what they believe’ (National Secular Society 2020, 4).

Modood and Sealy (2024, 130-131) register these ‘long-running campaigns’ and note that they are ‘most often made in the name of equality, which proponents see as being compromised by the perceived privilege of religion’. However, they reject this argument without examining its merits in the context of faith schools. Leaving aside the relatively brief treatment of faith schools in the book as a whole, the likely reason for this is the authors’ primary interest in the struggles of Muslims, combined with their finding that Muslims ‘do not seem to feel alienated because of the position of the established Church of England; there is virtually no record of any such criticism by a Muslim group. Quite to the contrary, many Muslims complain that Britain is too unreligious and anti-religious, too hedonistic, too consumerist, too materialist and so on. Muslims protest far more vigorously against secularist bans on modest female clothing such as the headscarf and the face veil than they do about the Anglican establishment or Christian privileges’ (Modood and Sealy 2024, 102-103).

It is certainly the case that faith schools’ entanglement with Islamophobia has not been specifically foregrounded by British Muslims’ most broadly representative organisation, the Muslim Council of Britain. On the contrary, its policy brief ahead of the 2019 general election

asserted that 'the next government should support the continuation of faith school provision' as well as ensure that 'schools with Muslim-majority children are treated as equally as other faith schools' (Muslim Council of Britain 2019, 44). Likewise, the more activist Muslim Engagement and Development (2019, 37) has campaigned for 'faith school provisions in the state sector for Muslim pupils and parents'. On the surface, these statements ratify Modood and Sealy's view that Muslims do not perceive faith schools as a problem.

Other (parts of the) statements, however, suggest unacknowledged tensions in Muslim concerns and demands. In its 2019 policy brief, the Muslim Council of Britain underscores how 'the National Curriculum should reflect the diversity of communities in the United Kingdom in terms of culture, ethnicity and belief. [...] Religious Education can help foster greater understanding and sensitivity between individuals and communities and can help to combat prejudice and racism. The curriculum should include the contribution of different faiths and cultures to British history [...]' (Muslim Council of Britain 2019, 43). In a separate report on Islamophobia, released in 2021, the Council also recommended that school leadership teams 'encourage recruitment of teachers from minority groups, including Muslim communities, while also striving to retain said teaching staff' (Muslim Council of Britain 2021, 127). Muslim Engagement and Development has not only pushed for curricular decolonisation but also for the accommodation of Muslim dress and prayers (Muslim Engagement and Development 2019, 32-35). While the *contents* of the National Curriculum are neither regulated by the Equality Act nor affected by the religious character of a school, its *delivery* in schools without a religious denomination does fall within the remit of the Act (Department for Education 2014, 14-15). Hence either the letter or the spirit of several measures that Muslim groups regard as essential for their educational and social inclusion conflict with the legal exemptions enjoyed by faith schools in England, which these groups also support.

This raises the question of how multicultural secularism, a normative and contextual theory attuned to Muslim experiences and aspirations, should choose between or seek to

reconcile conflicting demands. In a previous article setting out the principles of 'iterative contextualism' as an approach to political theorising, Modood and Thompson have acknowledged that formulating proposals for action or 'intimations' entails more than simply identifying prevailing social norms:

> [...] there will generally be more than one norm present in each context, and each of them may be interpreted in different ways. It follows that when the theorist examines a particular context she will face two interrelated tasks: first, to determine which norm is of most importance to it, and, second, to decide how that particular norm should be interpreted. To carry out these tasks, she will need a theory of interpretation. Here, we would suggest, the two criteria at the heart of Ronald Dworkin's interpretive method provide the right guidance. According to the first criterion, the norm selected must be one element of a plausible account of the context in question. Second, as Dworkin says, of those interpretations which fit the context, the theorist must select the one 'which is "substantively" better, that is, which better promotes the political ideals he thinks correct' (Modood and Thompson 2018, 353-354).

Informed by this approach, the following section will explore how Muslim demands could be interpreted in a way that reconciles them with each other and with those of secularists sharing Modood and Sealy's egalitarian, pro-diversity commitments.

4. Religious equality and political coalitions

While there is no obvious evidence of collaboration between secularists and the Muslim Council of Britain or Muslim Engagement and Development on the issue of faith schools, opportunities for such collaboration are exemplified by Accord Coalition, created in 2008 to promote inclusive education. Co-founded by Humanists UK, which remains a member, the Coalition also comprises two religious groups, the Hindu Academy and the General Assembly of

Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, as well as a large teacher union, a leading race equality think tank, and the youth wings of two progressive political parties (Accord Coalition, n.d.a). Unlike the secularist and Muslim groups discussed above, Accord (n.d.b) does not take a position on the desirability of state-funded faith schools but campaigns for removing their right to select (or, depending on one's stance, discriminate against) pupils and teachers on religious grounds. It also seeks the replacement of religious education with a beliefs and values education that would be 'wide ranging, fair and objective in its delivery, and as part of a properly monitored National Curriculum'. The subject would aim to 'develop the analytical tools and human sympathies needed to appreciate and understand different beliefs and values while developing and adhering to one's own life-stance' (Accord Coalition, n.d.c). These reforms' expected impact on faith schools can be glimpsed in Accord's justification for the employment of teachers of all faiths:

> Accord believes that all schools should promote a culture of questioning, knowledge, respect, accepting that others hold different beliefs, and exploring and affirming values, and that this should be epitomised in their staff. By helping faith schools employ teachers who hold the same religious views (and often the same views as the family of pupils), the law helps them become more religiously ghettoised, which can speak against this vision, and serve to further undermine community cohesion.

Even more revealing is the Coalition's position that all schools should develop an inclusive ethos statement:

> In the case of religious foundation schools, a positive ethos can helpfully be expressed through convictions derived from the belief background of that school, in conscious dialogue with those of other life-stances and beliefs. For example, Christian supporters of the Accord Coalition are proposing that church schools are challenged by the core tenets of their faith not to favour church members above

> others (as happens under many current policies), but rather to enact love of neighbour in its widest sense and to make the needs of the most vulnerable – of whatever belief background – their priority. Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Humanists, Buddhists, Hindus and many others will share that ethos but express it in their own terms (Accord Coalition, n.d.e).

In other words, Accord accepts in principle religious groups' involvement in educational governance and the transmission of a religious ethos in state-funded schools, but seeks to transform these schools into spaces where all religious and non-religious worldviews (in Rawlsian terms, 'comprehensive doctrines') are equally valued and included.

The existence of Accord suggests that there may be more common ground than Modood and Sealy acknowledge between secularists and religious minorities, at least in the British context where secularists do not categorically oppose the recognition and accommodation of religion in public life (Dupont 2022). In this sense, it is striking that neither the National Secular Society nor Humanists UK have campaigned against the display of religious symbols by students or teachers, a notoriously salient concern for secularists in France, Turkey and elsewhere (Joppke 2009; Elver 2012; Bosset 2013; Dupont 2018). Nor do they object to pupils learning about and appreciating a range of religious traditions. On the other hand, some forms of accommodation of majority religions do stand in tension with religious minorities' demands, even if they are not singled out in these minorities' public statements. Hence, the rise of religious equality as a political principle may go some way in bridging cleavages between religious and non-religious groups, albeit perhaps by creating new ones between progressive, pro-diversity stakeholders and the (primarily Christian) religious conservatives for whom anti-discrimination exemptions have been crafted. The point can perhaps be extrapolated beyond education: as Khadijah Elshayyal (2018: 208) has noted, 'Muslim activism within broad-based alliances has found common cause with a range of other minorities and disadvantaged groups,

and, crucially, is at ease with championing others' causes on the basis of shared values and the pursuit of equality, rather than group interests'.

5. The limits of multicultural 'thickening'

As the foregoing has shown, Modood and Sealy's endorsement of state-funded faith schools in their current form (designed to educate children of and in a single faith) is difficult to square with their egalitarian commitments as well as with the overall aspirations of British Muslims themselves. Revising their stance on this consequential policy area and endorsing religiously diverse schools through the removal of current equality exemptions would make multicultural secularism more internally consistent and more attractive to progressive stakeholders of all religions and beliefs, including secularists. While such a revision would dovetail with Modood and Sealy's view that dominant religious groups have a duty to 'facilitate the inclusion of religious diversity, minority faiths and interfaith relations' (Modood and Sealy 2024, 132), it would require them to qualify the claim that 'the established church, rather than being the font of alienation, has proved to be a valuable interfaith ally for minority faiths in helping them to gain a foothold in the public sphere [...]. Disestablishment in the name of neutrality, by contrast, would foreclose that prospect without conferring any benefits to religious minorities' (Modood and Sealy 2024, 103). More fundamentally, it would entail rejecting the notion that moving from moderate to multicultural secularism necessarily involves the 'thickening' rather than the 'thinning' of state-religion connections. Insofar as religious exemptions from equality law constitute a state-religion connection, it is one that certainly appears ripe for thinning.

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